

## Project Epoch Callips

By Michael Amorel

"Six sixty-six," the driver said.

"What?" I asked, distracted by the simple suburban house. I had been double-checking the address. It was the correct one for the interview.

"The fare. Six sixty-six."

"Oh right." I handed him eight. "Keep the change. Can I have the receipt?" If I didn't get the job, I could still write off the cab.

He harrumphed, ripped off the slip of paper from the meter and tossed it through the hole in the security window.

"Thanks," I tossed back.

He grimaced and mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like "You're welcome."

I stepped out onto the sidewalk. Once the cab's door closed, it sped off like a bat out of hell. As the engine noise died in the distance, I was struck by the silence. I knew there'd be a difference coming from Manhattan into Jersey, but I just wasn't use to the quiet. The leaves had fallen from the trees. There was no traffic at all. The wind wasn't even blowing. Beneath the cool November sun, the street looked dead.

I had trouble believing that the house could contain a production company, or at least, a production company that could afford my day rate. But, I had received a day's pay just for coming out for the interview. Considering how bizarre that was to start with, I had to do some research before even agreeing to come out here. The website had seemed professional enough and they had boasted a well-connected clientele. I figured it was worth a shot. After all, they asked for a national viral marketing campaign producer, and those of us with actual experience didn't come cheap, that is if we could even be found. I wouldn't want to commute out here every day, but it couldn't hurt to find out what they were offering.

"Better not be a waste of my time," I growled as I strode to the front door.

On the second ring, the door opened. A tallish man with dark hair and indefinable ethnicity answered. He wasn't really dark or light skinned, nor was he fine or coarse featured. His hair was long, but not too long, and he had a hint of stubble that made him look like he was either just beginning to grow some facial hair or hadn't shaved in a number of days.

The only definite thing was that he was definitely wearing a wife-beater. My stomach dropped. This was definitely a bad sign.

"Yes?" he asked with surprising culture.

"Is this Down Below Productions?"

"Yes, yes it is. And you are..."

"Ms. Liebermahn. I have an appointment for three o'clock."

"Ah yes, the producer." His face broke into a disarming smile, all white teeth in perfect rows. "Please, do come in. Glad to see you're on board."

Before I could tell him I wasn't yet, he turned around and walked into the depths of the house. If I wanted to find out anything about the job, I had no choice but to follow him. I stepped over the threshold into a sparsely decorated hallway. Besides the hardwood floor, the white walls and two nondescript wood doors, there was only a barren coat rack.

"Would you mind closing the door behind you?" he asked as he opened one of the inside doors.

"I'd like—"

"Thank you," he said over his shoulder as he vanished through the doorway.

The thought that I should turn and walk away briefly passed through my mind. But if I did, I'd have wasted a trip out here, and that would simply piss me off. I had to remind myself that just because this man was brushing me off, it didn't mean he was dangerous or crazy. It just meant he was a flake. I'd dealt with enough clients to handle a flake. I was almost certain there wasn't a client out there that wasn't a flake at some point. Besides, I had the foresight to tell my husband where I was. At least someone would be able to point the police in the right direction if things went south. I briefly thanked him for having half a brain in his head. Listening to my highly trained business instincts, I chose to close the door.

I followed Mr. Tall, Underdressed and Mysterious through the door and ended up in a cozy study. There was a large, but plain, wooden desk in the center of the room topped by a table lamp, a keyboard and a flat screen monitor. A simple wooden chair sat on this side and an executive chair on the other. The wall behind the desk was mostly hidden by a huge bookshelf with books tastefully arranged on the shelves, not too dense and not too sparse, and a few innocuous knickknacks rounding out the spacing and making the whole look well used and comfortable. The left wall sported a thick black drape, which was closed. The right one held a glassed in fireplace, a small fire warming the room.

"I hope you don't mind the fire," he said, sitting down in the executive chair, which made that faux leather squeak. "I have the most terrible time with the cold."

"Whatever makes you comfortable." I tried to sound agreeable. The décor inside was definitely more reassuring than the façade outside.

"Terrific! These little gas darlings are so much cleaner than burning wood."

"I'm sure they are."

"Now, where are my manners? Please, make yourself comfortable. Sit down." He waved a hand at the chair.

"Thank you," I said with a smile that I hoped wasn't strained and took the offered seat.

"So, you'll probably want to know about the specifics."

"Actually, we—"

"How right you are!" he exclaimed. "I didn't offer you anything. Would you like coffee, tea, water?"

"No really, you didn't—"

"I'm up for coffee. Hold that thought."

He jumped up and bolted from the room. I was left alone, stewing in a mixture of surprise and rising anger. I didn't even know his name and he wanted to jump into specifics on a job I knew nothing about. I decided that if he didn't come to the point and answer some questions, I was just going to get up and leave.

He sailed back in, carrying two black coffee cups. "Milk, no sugar," he said as he plunked one of the cup on the desk in front of me.

"Yeah, how did you know?" I was stunned that he knew something this personal.

"I make it a point of being informed about my potential employees' needs and desires."

Warning bells sounded in my head. "But, where could you possibly—"

"I have my sources." He gave me a sly wink. "So, we've got a large budget that needs—"

"Now hold on." I interrupted calmly. He was moving way too fast for my taste. "I have a few questions before we start."

He looked at me blankly for a moment. Then, he flashed me that surreally perfect smile and settled back into his chair. "Forgive me. I thought this had all been explained to you. Please, ask away."

"Thank you." I took a deep breath to get some of the tension out of my body. I offered him my warmest client smile. "First, we haven't been properly introduced."

"That's not really a question."

My smile stiffened.

"But, I still haven't found my manners. The way I'd been acting, you must think me a total cad." He extended a hand. "I'm Lucifer Lightbringer, owner of Down Below Productions."

I shook his hand. "That's a loaded name."

"Tell me about it."

"Nom de plume?"

"No, my father had quite a dark sense of humor."

"Ah. So, what's the project?"

"My guess is that means you didn't get the email?"

"Not that I know of."

"Well then, I'd better start from the beginning."

"That would be good."

He leaned forward and steepled his hands. "You'd be working on Project Epoch Callips."

"Project Apocalypse?" I clarified.

"No," he said with a grin. "Epoch... Callips... But, you do catch on quick. We don't want to raise any eyebrows when people see it on paper."

"And there won't be when someone sees Lucifer Lightbringer?"

"You'd be surprised."

"Actually, after working with some of the rocket scientists I've had as clients, I probably wouldn't."

"Ouch." He grinned again. "I'll just let that one lie."

I grinned back. "Probably for the best."

We sat grinning at each other for a few moments.

"So," I said, breaking the silence. "What is Project Epoch Callips? Some sort of viral, multi-media, real-time, national promotion?"

"No... Well, yes... Kind of..." he said and then trailed off.

Trying to help him find the words, I offered "Is it for a game?"

"No, definitely not... It's a... hmm..."

"It's a... music push?"

"No..."

"A product placement?"

"No..."

"A TV show?"

"No..."

I racked my brain. "A porn site?"

"No!" he said with a hint of disgust.

Exasperated, I finally gave up. "Well, what exactly is Epoch Callips?"

"To tell you the truth, it's actually what you'd think it is."

"And what is that?"

"You know, The Apocalypse, Armageddon, The End of Days."

"And what does that entail?" I asked, trying to figure out if this was a great marketing campaign or a get-up-and-leave-the-crazy moment. I generally left religious fanaticism to religious fanatics. There was enough to worry about in life without picking apart the minutia of whose book was better than whose.

"I wish you had received the email. It spelled everything out. I'm looking to put on all the things mentioned in the Bible. The seven signs, the fire from the heavens, the angels of Gen, the Four Horsemen, the whole ball of wax."

I waited for him to get to the punch line. He calmly stared back at me. It took me a moment to realize he wasn't going to add anything more. Then, it all sunk in.

"You want me to organize the destruction of the world?" I asked incredulously.

"Oh goodness me, no!" He laughed. "I wouldn't want to destroy the world, only shake up the people in it."

"You want to put on the Apocalypse as entertainment?"

"I think 'education' would be the correct term."

"Okay. Give me a moment to visualize this," I said. But, I was thinking, Give me a moment to figure out how crazy you are.

Ignoring my request, he barreled on. "Just think of it as a hyper-realistic passion play with all the bells and whistles. Done in real time."

"That's a mighty big order."

"I know."

"I probably deleted your email thinking it was spam from some Right-wing fringe group."

"Yes, I could see how you might think that."

"Still, that's a big job."

"I heard you were the best."

I took a moment and tried to gage where he was coming from. Despite the years of working with various clients and being forced to learn how to read people, I couldn't get a feeling for him. He was simply staring at me, waiting for me to make the next move. I was pretty sure he wasn't joking; there were no telltale signs or crinkles of humor at the corner of his eyes. He gave the air of taking this whole thing seriously.

Leaving aside the question of his sanity, I decided to jump right on in and treat this like any other job. If his money was good, then I didn't really care what his product was. It was all in the presentation.

I went for the nuts: "What's the budget and the timeline?"

He visibly relaxed. "We have three point two billion and three months."

I wouldn't have even begun to believe him if I hadn't already been paid just for the interview.

"Hmm..." I said to fill the silence that would normally come from my jaw dropping. My mind could barely wrap around a number that large, let alone how to budget it out. "You're putting me on, right?"

"No, I assure you I'm not."

"Three point two billion." I had to say it just to feel such wealth on my tongue, even if it weren't true. But, saying it gave it weight, made it more real.

"Is there a problem with the figure?" Lucifer looked concerned.

Deciding to treat this like any other job, I answered, "Might be. Any wiggle room?" It was one of those questions that seemed to make people think I knew what I was doing even if I didn't. Unlike now, I usually did.

"We might have some," he said sheepishly. "But, I'd have to talk to our investors into it and I'd rather not do that. They've already given a lot."

"Just wanted to see how tight the budget is. And what would be my line?"

"How about a straight half percent?"

Trying to keep my shock and awe off my face, I countered with "I'd feel better about two."

"I think I can go as high as one, but no further. There's a lot to be done and it probably won't go as far as it sounds like it would."

"Fine, I can live with one." I hoped I wouldn't hyperventilate. I could almost deal with an out-and-out loon for that pay.

"Great. You can parcel it out as you wish."

"Weekly works best." I'd only have a little wait until the first check cleared and I'd know for sure if this was on the up and up.

"Fine, whatever you need."

"So do you have a line by line breakdown or do you need me to set it up."

"I have the basics sketched out."

"Then, I'll take it and flesh it out as we go along."

"Sounds good."

"Do you have the location or locations all set?"

"Well, we were thinking that it should be a world wide event."

"Hmm..." I said, deliberately drawing it out to pique his interest. I hated when clients gave an enormous indefinable idea for an event. It meant they hadn't thought anything through yet.

"Something wrong with that?" he asked, following my lead.

"No. Not really."

"Then, what's with the 'Hmm'?"

"Well, you could save a bit of money by focusing only on where the event would be best received."

"What does that mean?"

"Instead of gunning for the whole world, maybe you should focus on specific locations in areas of your largest target populations."

"Okay," he said, not quite convinced.

"I'm just thinking that it would be kinda pointless to have a bit of Bible-thumping Apocalypse out in the middle of somewhere, say Mongolia for instance, if there won't be people who even knows what the Apocalypse is."

"Hmm... that's a good point." He was coming around.

"Could you narrow down your target audience and figure out which cities it would be best to hit?"

"I think I have a spreadsheet on that somewhere." He started fiddling with the computer.

"Great! Compile a list with the appropriate demographics and email it to me. Then, I can get a cost breakdown started for each of the cities. We'll be able to see how to most effectively spend that budget. I'll get you more bang for your buck."

"Brava! It's been less than half an hour and you already have me excited and jumping through hoops. I think you can actually pull this off."

"That's why you've hired me."

"Then, it's official?"

"I'm your man, so to speak."

His eyes crinkled happily. "So to speak."

"Shall we get started?"

"Sounds good. So I was thinking..."

Lucifer and I started going over the budget line by line and preparing to staff-up. I wasn't sure what to think about his planning and his stated goal. Luckily, I didn't need to think too much about it. I just had to figure out how to pull it off. If I did this right, it would be the biggest campaign the world has ever known. I hoped his crazy notions wouldn't take what could be a great marketing idea and make it into some lame, PC, family crap. After all, from what I remember about it, with all the murder and sex, the Bible wasn't meant for kids.

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"Fourteen million more?" asked Lucifer, raising his eyebrows.

After a month of going back and forth over the huge production lines themselves, I didn't expect him to be very surprised. His look would have been more dramatic if it weren't for the sounds of the new receptionist answering the phone, the support staff running around organizing and the whirring computers and clicking keyboards in the basement CGI studio. We almost needed a valet for all the cars out front and that was only the office here. We'd already started production teams in thirteen other countries. And that was just the skeleton of the structure.

Confidently, I responded, "As far as I can figure, with the talent we've negotiated, that'd be the minimum overage."

"Well, that will put a damper on things."

"Are you sure we need famous people to fill out the roles? They cost so much. Wouldn't it be better to have nameless talent so that it looks more real?"

"That is a possibility, but I really want this whole thing to be for the people. They identify with the famous for some reason. Let's give them what they really want, if we can."

"Well then, it's going to cost."

Lucifer looked at me for a moment, then stared at the ceiling. He made a little clucking noise and tapped his pen on the desk. He 'hmmum'ed a few times before finally shaking his head and turning back to me.

"I'll have to call the investors," he informed me. "Are you sure that fourteen will cover everything? I don't want to have to call them again."

"Then double the number."

His eyebrows raised in surprise. "Twenty eight?"

"Better make it an even thirty. That sounds better."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Alright, here I go..." He reached for his cell's hands-free headset.

"Totally positive."

He put the bud in his ear. "I'm dialing..."

"Go ahead."

He dialed. "It's ringing..."

"Positive," I reiterated.

"Hello," he said as he was connected.

"Mostly."

He scowled and held up a finger to silence me. "Patronè! How good to hear you as well... Is he in? Certainly, I'll hold."

"Patronè?" I stage whispered.

"Shhh. Long distance to Rome."

"Ahh."

He held up his finger again. "Yes! Yes... I did... Fine. Everything is going fine... What? How did you guess? Ah... I need... No really, everything is fine. I just need... Thirty... Yes, I said thirty... Million... that's right... Half? But where... Ah... the Right Wing... Okay, but... Okay... Fine... Sure... You have a beautiful day too... My best to the Secret Circle... Thanks... Bye."

He hung up, flipping his phone closed and pulling the ear bud out. He sat down and slouched into his chair with a sigh.

"Everything alright?" I asked.

"They'll only offer half. I have to call Atlanta and then the Middle East for the rest of it. If they won't give, then I'll have to call Hollywood, New York and China. Boy, I hate dealing with entertainment backers."

"But, the upside is that we got the overage for the talent," I reminded him. "You can have Arnold play the horseman War. We'll need a Clydesdale or something for that."

"That's true. At least it will be an event everyone will want to see."

"Almost everyone."

"Right. So who else do we have?"

We jumped into taming the terrible shrew that was Talent.

That evening, I thought about what I had thought was a simple event. The overage call was the first time I'd seen him mention anything even remotely pointing to his backers. Just hearing the location he had placed his calls to was rather awe-inspiring. And the fact that they could move millions like that was a little unsettling. Whoever his backers were, they were powerful people in high places.

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Lucifer was squeezing one of those stress balls. Behind him were the file cabinets I made him get as a back up for the computer files. Paper was cresting off the top like a tidal wave in a Japanese ink drawing. All around on the ground were stacks of papers, file folders filled with papers and boxes filled with both.

Neither of us was in a good mood. With only three weeks left, we were picking the extras and we still hadn't settled on all the locations. We were

supposed to narrow everything down and set up dress rehearsals. At least, that had been the plan when I got in this morning.

Giving the ball one last squeeze, Lucifer finally got his irritation under control enough to respond. "There are ten-thousand angels of Gen. We can't do it with just one hundred. We need at least a thousand for it to look even close and that would be stretching it."

I looked at him with my "Do you have any idea what you're asking?" face. "If we could get the actors for only one-hundred dollars a day, and that's a big if, we're talking about five-hundred-thousand over five days for extras alone. Add to that costuming, craft services, transportation and whatever else they need and you're asking for over a million for this group of extras. And that's only for a thousand."

"Can't we borrow from another line? I think it's really important to get a few thousand more."

"Unless you want to make the Four Horsemen walk, I don't think so."

"That'd be plain silly." Lucifer got up and started pacing around the room. "Think, damn you. Think!"

"Excuse me?"

He flashed that charming smile of his. "Not you, my dear. I was berating myself."

"Ah. Don't let me stop you."

He chuckled and turned to the fire. He stretched out his hands toward the heat and then rubbed them together.

"How about this?" I offered. "What if we use five-hundred angels—"

"A pitiful amount," he sulked.

"Let me finish."

"Sorry. Do continue."

"Thank you." I paused for dramatic effect. "What if we use five-hundred angels and then put the rest in the shot with CGI?"

"That'll work great on the broadcast, but it won't have much effect on the event audience."

"It'll have enough. I don't think anyone will be taking the time to count how many angels of Gen are behind the Four Horsemen when the sky is raining fire."

"Fair enough," he said and returned to his seat. "I don't like it, but it might hold the budget at bay. And that returns us to the original question of the fire from the sky..."

"Well, you didn't like the napalm or the burning confetti," I countered flippantly.

He made a bitter face. "The object isn't to hurt anyone. If we maim people or do worse, they won't be very inclined to watch the important events and the best effects will be wasted."

"Yeah, I've been meaning to ask you about that."

His eyebrows knitted. "About what?"

"If this is suppose to be the Apocalypse—"

"Which it is."

"Yes, well, if this is the actual Apocalypse, then why is audience safety such an issue? I mean, I'm not really up on the implications of all this. But, if they're still on earth, they're already sinners and they're going to burn for all eternity, or something like that, right?"

He broke out his trademark grin. "You're so literal."

"So, what does that mean?"

"The only thing any of you humans—" He said the word "humans" the same way I'd say "maggots". He used this tone so often, I'd almost become used to hearing it that way. "—know about the Apocalypse is from books written by humans and the stories told by humans. Books are just books and stories are just stories. This type of thing occurs constantly."

He was so blasé about it, I couldn't hold my tongue. With a totally deadpan tone I repeated, "The Apocalypse happens all the time..."

"Yes, just not how any of the books tell it."

"Yeah, I don't recall any hellfire raining down from the sky lately... or ever, actually."

"Did you see movies of Brittan and Germany during the war? The air itself burned."

"Yeah, okay," I conceded. "That was a bit of hellfire. But, I bet the object of that was to hurt people. If that was an Apocalypse, then whoever set that up kinda goofed up that one. Lots of people died."

"Yes they did, but they died at each other's hands. Even though the Apocalypse helped stimulate the socio-political environment to change, it was the people who killed each other. Nothing forced anyone to pick up a gun or bomb or stick and kill people. They did it themselves."

"You're saying that the soldiers' governments didn't make them fight? That they wanted to go? That there was no justification for the war?"

"I'm not saying anything of the sort. I'm saying that people make themselves believe all sorts of things. Claiming 'The Devil made me do it,' or 'Society is to blame,' never has and never will be a morally realistic excuse, except to dunderheads who believe it. The first thing everyone wants is to take credit for something good and the last thing anyone wants is to take responsibility for something bad."

"I know. 'Responsibility is the burden of greatness' and all that. But, it doesn't answer my question."

"How about this?" He took a deep breath. "The Apocalypse is simply change; the death of one era and the birth of another."

"So, no one dies?"

"Not by my hands."

"So, they can die?"

"Yes, but—"

"Aha!" I burst out joyously. "So we could use napalm!" It was a great deal of fun to play Devil's advocate with someone who acted like they were the Devil.

"But," he repeated, looking me sternly in the eyes. "Not by my hands. Nor by my actions. Nor by my influence. I cannot cause someone or something, like napalm, to harm a human."

"Why not?"

"It's an unwritten rule."

"Whose rule?"

"My father's."

"You mean God, right?"

"Who else?"

"Touché." I flashed a grin at him to calm the air. "Then if you can't harm sinners, what's the Apocalypse really for?"

"I told you. It's a change."

"What, like the world is a timeshare and it's evil's turn or something?"

"Don't be obtuse. It's much more realistic than that. There will be a sudden violent change in the nature of human interaction. For those who have prepared for it, it's a minor inconvenience, and for those who have not, it's hell... No pun intended."

"Funny. So, this whole thing is a preparation for a major change," I paraphrased, hoping we'd gotten to a point where an explanation was coming.

"Of sorts," he hesitantly conceded.

"And that change is what?" I prodded.

"It's really a culmination of all the events recently."

"And by recently, you mean..." I waved a hand to indicate he should finish my sentence.

"I mean the last few hundred years. The political, social and religious tensions throughout the world."

"So what is the change?" I was growing impatient.

"Well, it starts when I take the Saved to Heaven." Finally, he offered a tidbit.

"And the Saved are who?"

He looked at me like I'd grown a second head. "Didn't you read the book of Revelations like I'd suggested?"

"Sure I did," I lied, trying to stop myself from blushing. "I did. But you said that I was taking it too seriously. Why don't you tell me who they are? Then, I'll know exactly what you mean."

"Well, the book says only ten thousand of the children of Abraham will go to Heaven. So if you take the literal translation, that would mean..." Lucifer waited for me expectantly.

"Uh... I don't know."

"They'd all be Jews," he said with a huff. "Dead Jews. Ones that died before the coming of Christ."

I was stunned into silence. Lucifer was heading into potentially racist waters that I wanted nothing to do with. For the first time in years, I actually had nothing to say.

Regardless of my reaction, he continued on, "If followers of the bible took it literally, all the seats would have been taken and that ship would have sailed. Since that was before my time and the time of our backers, it

would be pretty silly to limit the Saved to those dead Jews who are already in Heaven, now wouldn't it."

So, he wasn't being racist; he was being pragmatic. Even if I didn't agree with what he was saying, I could understand where he was coming from.

"I see," I said. "You've enlarged your definition of the Saved to include yourself and your backers."

"Right, so the Saved are mostly the people who've paid for this Apocalypse. They are all members of various religious groups from New-Age Wiccans to Right Wing Christians to Jews and Muslims. We even have some Buddhist, Shinto and Hindi members. They've all given a lot of money and time to the Apocalypse."

"Ah," I said, finally getting what he was going for. "So, paying for this Apocalypse is what you meant by 'prepared for it,' isn't it?"

"That's not all there is to it. But, in a manner of speaking, that's one way to put it."

"So what happens to those who don't prepare for the Apocalypse?"

"The short answer is that they stay here to deal with all the upheavals."

"And by 'upheavals,' you mean..." I waited for him to continue.

"The fire from Heaven, the Four Horsemen, the angels of Gen, etc." He had a one-track mind with those angels of Gen.

Trying to get a grasp on the overall view, I said, "Okay, then. The whole point of this is to take the 'Saved' to Heaven and leave the rest to fend for themselves in a world gone mad."

"That's a rather simplistic summation. But yes, that could be an accurate description."

"But what's to stop everyone just getting on with their lives? I mean, if you can't cause them harm, they'll just go on as if everything was normal."

"Ah contraire, moin fraire. Without the moral guidance from the Saved, all society will soon collapse into anarchy."

"So you're saying that without guidance from these people who you will take to Heaven, common humans can't keep the world going?"

"Bingo."

I stared at him with a look of utter disbelief.

He misunderstood my expression. "Don't worry. Because of your help on this project, you are reserved a space among the Saved."

"Then what use is the money you're paying me?" I could be pragmatic too.

He shrugged. "It will make your time here more enjoyable. A little taste of Heaven, so to speak."

"Well, thanks for at least letting me know," I said snidely. An idea popped into my brain. "Is my Michael among the Saved?"

"Just a second..." Lucifer clacked a few keys, shook the mouse and checked the screen. "Not normally, but we can make an exception in his case."

"And the rest of my family?"

He spread his hands apologetically. "I'm sorry, we can only make an exception for Michael. Neither of your families can be counted among the Saved."

I disliked being told what can and can't happen. "What if I don't want to go?"

"You are in a unique situation. You can either come with the Saved or take your chances here on earth."

Unable to believe Lucifer's balls for saying such things to me, or any employee for that matter, I had to ask, "So you're saying I have to choose whether to leave my family and friends here and go to Heaven with the Saved or stay here with my family and friends while the world falls apart around us?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Wow... That's a hard thing to hear." And I wasn't talking about his offered choice.

He sure sounded like he thought I was as he consoled, "I'm sure it is."

Still unable to believe he had the gall to say such things, I asked rhetorically, "I mean, what do I do with that?"

"Would you like to take the rest of the day off?"

"No," I said, coming back to a semblance of work reality. "I can't leave things unfinished."

"We have got time. We are just going around in circles anyway. Go spend some time with Michael and your family. It will ease your mind."

"You sure?" Any excuse to get some paid free time with Michael was a good one.

"Yes, I am sure."

"Okay then." I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. "See you tomorrow."

"Only if you feel like coming in. Give me a call if you do not"

"Okay."

I left Lucifer's house with crazy thoughts frothing my brain inside my skull. I barely noticed the receptionist's shocked good-bye. The cab got stuck in tunnel traffic on the way into Manhattan. It gave me way too much time to think about things.

I was pretty sure that Lucifer was a nut job, but with the money and the backing, I knew he had a goodly amount of power. And as much as I eschewed religion, I believed peoples' faith shouldn't be toyed with, particularly for some sort of personal gain. If I went through with this, no matter what really happened to the rich fanatics that Lucifer thought of as his Saved, lots of people would most likely get hurt. But I couldn't back out now. Lucifer would just get someone else to do his bidding.

In the far remote possibility that somehow this actually was the Apocalypse, I didn't want to lose my family. I was pretty damn sure that Michael didn't want to lose his, despite his inability to get along with most of them. It was a choice I wouldn't make.

I had to think of something. After all, a good producer thinks of ways to get out of bad situations. A good producer uses her resources to the utmost. A good producer makes sure the show goes on without a hitch and keeps

everyone satisfied. I had the connections. I had the resources. I just had to percolate the pieces to get the perfect cup of coffee. I had three weeks left to organize the Apocalypse. I hoped it was enough time to figure a way out of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

One week before deadline, I arrived at the office before Lucifer. I had thought he lived here, but there was no trace of him anywhere. When I asked the night shift CGI crew in the basement, they said they hadn't seen him for hours. Since I came early to avoid dealing with all the support staff anyway, I decided to get to work and set up my laptop on my side of Lucifer's desk.

While filling out a few lines in preparation for today's budget overview, I picked up a folder off the desk that I thought was the totaled travel expenses. Flipping it open, I saw a list of names and amounts. I registered that they were not what I was looking for and had snapped the file shut when I realized the first name was Al Qaeda. Worried that this was somehow connected to terrorism, I flipped it open again and stared at the names.

Sure enough, Al Qaeda was there in black and white. I was getting ready to high tail it out of there when I noticed a note scrawled next to the name. It read "Too unstable, too poor. Too bad, no way." To the right of the name was a column for money donated with a big black zero in it.

Before I could take much relief in the information, my eye was drawn down the list by the other names and amounts. There were pages of names, most with huge dollar amounts besides them. I recognized a few names of extremist groups on both the left and the right. I also recognized a few of the less extreme group on the right and the left, or at least groups I had thought weren't that extreme.

I quickly put the file back on the desk as close to the position I'd picked it up as possible. My mind was reeling. This was all almost too surreal to consider. I'd heard jokes in college about extremist groups like the KKK, Greenpeace and the Right Wing being led by Satan, but this was ridiculous.

Lucifer whistled softly from directly over my shoulder.

It took all my control to not jump at the sound.

"I wouldn't want those people to find out about you or your family," he said as he walked around the desk to his chair. "Never know what they might do." He smiled lightly, sat down and looked me straight in the eyes. "They probably couldn't do much damage since the deadline is so close. But, not all of their members are Saved. They could make a terrible mess of things for those left behind."

I did my best to smile back. "I don't really know who those people would be. Besides, they don't sound like my type."

His smile bloomed warmly. "Definitely not."

He began to outline the agenda for the day. I could barely hear him over the thoughts in my head.

I was now sure that Lucifer was a nut job, and if these were the real sources of his money and backing, a dangerous one at that. He had a great amount of power bent towards his own twisted plan. I couldn't let him go

through with this, no matter what would happen to the rich fanatics he called his Saved. With these groups, their tactics and their combined resources, a lot of people would get hurt. But I sure as hell couldn't back out now. This close to the end, Lucifer didn't need someone else to do his anymore bidding, and despite his claims to the contrary, he was crazy enough that he'd probably have me offed to keep me silent.

In another darker possibility, I realized that his statement about my family not being able to come along to Heaven was probably a thinly veiled threat. I couldn't let him take away my family or Michael's family. That was a choice I definitely could and would make.

I needed to end this thing once and for all. I began making a list of all the people I'd ever worked with. It was time to call in all my markers and all my favors. I had to be more cunning and tricky than ever before. I had to come up with a decisive and brilliant plan. I had one week. I hoped it would be enough.

\* \* \* \* \*

The day I had been hired for arrived uneventfully. There was no night before gala, no newspaper headlines, no newscasters bawling and no crazy people shouting. It was a normal January day, perhaps a touch warmer than most, but normal.

After a few days of frantically fighting to find a way to avoid the Apocalypse, I'd resigned myself to the fact that this day would come and there was nothing I could do to stop it. This resignation gave me a new perspective on things. I decided to focus on figuring out how to live after Lucifer's Apocalypse, whatever its results might actually be. Despite my best efforts, my work ethic wouldn't allow me to pull any of Lucifer's punches and remain involved in the process, so I figured ways to subvert his directives to carving out a niche in the future world. I kept expecting him to find out what I was doing and pull my plug, but he never did. He was too secure in his beliefs. Talk about blind faith.

Just before dawn, I took a cab to a place I'd staked out for us on the Jersey side of the Hudson. It gave us the best view of Manhattan and Jersey in general. Lucifer's disturbingly cliché black limo was already parked on the grass. He was decked out in a black tux, top hat and cane, but he was still wearing a wife-beater underneath the jacket.

As I approached him, Lucifer smiled his stunning smile and asked, "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be," I responded, trying to keep the butterflies in my stomach and out of my voice. "The Saved have been contacted and accounted for. All the other team coordinators have contacted me and let me know that everyone is in place and ready. The moment the Saved are safely gone, you give the word and the Apocalypse will begin."

"I hope this goes smoothly," he said excitedly as he dialed the pre-arranged number into his cell phone.

So do I, I silently prayed.

"Hello, Father," He said into his cell.

I'm not sure why Lucifer thought God would take the form of a man. With all the angels at his beck and call, I think God wouldn't need a man for

this, let alone a cell phone. Lucifer started talking to "his father" on the cell a few weeks ago. I took it as another sign of his madness.

With gravity and decorum, he said, "Initiate Project Epoch Callips." He hung up and gave me a smile. "Here we go."

All across the city and the surrounding countryside, as it would be all around the world, rays of light shot from the heavens to the ground. Each beam illuminated one of Lucifer's Saved, the holiest of the holy, the richest of the rich and the proudest of the proud.

"Nice work," Lucifer said with approval. "Very nice indeed!"

"Thank you."

"That'll definitely give those left below something to envy."

"Sure will."

We watched as the pillars of light appeared and faded. Wherever they touched the earth, another of his Saved should have been disappearing in a flash of light. After a few moments, all of the beams had finished their work.

"Well then..." Lucifer began.

"Yes. So this phase is over."

"Yes," he agreed sedately, sounding like a child after all the Christmas presents had been opened. "It's over."

We stood looking at each other for a bit. Neither of us seemed to be able to think of anything to say that would move this to a close. So much had been done to get here and it was over in a matter of minutes. There was too much for words to sound anything but hollow.

"Are you sure you want to stay?" Lucifer finally asked me.

"I... I have to. It's Michael... I can't leave him behind, alone."

"Then, I wish you the best of luck."

Obviously uncomfortable with normal human contact, Lucifer gave me a half hug that was completely awkward.

"You too," I offered back.

Lucifer disengaged and dialed the number on his cell phone. "Beam me up, Scotty!" he yelled. He paused and listened. The hint of a stern toned voice came from the receiver. Lucifer replied, "I'm sorry father. I've just always wanted to say that. Nodisrespect intended. I'm ready now."

I offered Lucifer a heavy-hearted grin and small wave as his own private beam shot down from the heavens. He waved back, smiling that perfect smile that I knew I'd never forget. It was just about that moment that the stench of burning flesh reached my nostrils. Lucifer's only reaction was a slight widening of his eyes before his skin blackened, cracked and sprayed off in a huge cloud of gray ash. The beam continued to glow for a few more moments after Lucifer had disintegrated, charring the ground upon which he had stood. Then, it vanished as quickly as it came.

I held my breath. If anything were going to happen to me, if the Apocalypse was going to come, it would have been this moment. I wasn't sure what I expected. I had imagined everything from Lucifer reappearing and casting me into a pit of fire to a Monty Python-esque hand coming down from the clouds to squish me flat. I waited a full ten minutes, just to be sure.

When it became apparent that nothing was going to exact it's biblical revenge on me, my grin turned into a full-blown smile. I flipped open my cell phone and dialed the number.

"Yes, my son?" came the warm and powerful voice on the other side.

"Great job," I responded. "He's toast."

"Wonderful!" Michael happily chirped back.

"Were there any glitches?"

"Nothing major. All targets were hit. I was told that one white power televangelist was vaporized while doing a live show on a local channel, a group of Congolese racial purifiers were incinerated while raping another tribe's women, and some Islamic fundi was wearing a ton of explosives and took out his whole Mosque while they were blessing him for Jihad."

"Not bad at all."

"I'm sure other stories will crop up once the shock wears off."

"I bet," I agreed. "Thank Eric for me. What a genius for hooking up to that old star wars satellite system. He earned his money. Not a trace of Tall, Dark and Skeeve left. Damn those things worked well."

"They sure did. You better get yourself over here before the party starts."

"You aren't starting anything till I get there."

"Damn right! You're the best baby!"

"Don't you forget it."

With a smile, I called a cab and waited. I felt a freedom I hadn't felt before, like parents when the last of their children leave the house. That "Now that we're rid of the kids, let's have some real fun" kind of freedom.

Despite the massive schedule of events for today, no one would be the wiser. I was betting that most of the people who disappeared were feared and hated, except by the others who were vaporized as well, so they wouldn't be missed much. The rest of the people involved in Project Epoch Callips believed they were in some sort of international reality game. I'd even set up a simultaneous after party to happen in all the major cities of the world. Two billion dollars goes awfully far when dealing with second- and third-world support staff.

As far as Lucifer's prophesized collapse went, I had faith that society would be safe. The project got rid of so many of the world's dangerous rich religious wackos and would inject over two billion dollars into the world's poorest economies. There was no doubt that society would change, but I was betting we'd be the better for it, regardless of what other wackos were waiting in the wings. At least we have a chance to make our own way now.

Personally, I'd probably be the most sought after producer from this project, at least from what the public knows about. Even if I wasn't, I had thirty two million in the bank and was about to be the guest of honor at the world's most expensive party, paid for by the agents of oppression and fear. What could be wrong with that?

The End